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Reading Ishiguro Today: Suspicion and Form

Literary studies in the twenty-first century has been characterized by a restlessness and dissatisfaction with the everyday practice of criticism. What Jeffrey J. Williams calls the “new modesty” in the field (*passim*), in which the bombastic style of the theory era has given way to more empirically informed and rhetorically subdued kinds of critical writing, has been one manifestation of this dissatisfaction. Vocal complaints about the dominance of historicism have been another.¹ But perhaps the most significant development has been the evolving debates about close reading, from the chorus of critics calling for its “return,” to the increasingly frequent proposals for new or recalibrated approaches—including distant reading, surface reading, descriptive reading, the new formalism, method reading, and many others.² In this article, I argue, firstly, that the interpretative strategies brought to light by recent debates about critical method can enhance our understanding of Kazuo Ishiguro’s fiction, and secondly, that his fiction can in turn help us appraise the value, but also the limitations, of these polemical interventions.³

The most prominent of these interventions—and certainly the most germane for readers of Ishiguro—have been the various efforts to redress the perceived hegemony of “suspicious reading” in the discipline today. In 2009, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus influentially introduced the idea of “surface reading,” suggesting that “the hermeneutics of suspicion” has become “a general property of literary criticism” (5), and promoting in its place (highly disparate) critical practices that attend to “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding” (9). Rita Felski has gone further still, devoting *The Limits of Critique* (2015) to detailing the “pervasive presence” of suspicion in literary studies as both a “mood and method” (1), and arguing for more positive orientations towards texts under the banner of “postcritical reading.” It is important to recognize that Felski advances this critique

of critique from the position of a scholar acutely cognizant of its allure—far from “an ascetic exercise in demystification,” she suggests, “suspicious reading” is “a style of thought infused with a range of passions and pleasures, intense engagements and eager commitments” (10). There are of course many kinds of suspicion, and the kind postcritique has in its sights is ideological suspicion *à la* Fredric Jameson: the interrogation of texts to uncover the ideological investments they purportedly strive to conceal. Nevertheless, as Tatyana Gershkovich points out, “[c]ritics of suspicion tend to posit, optimistically, that we can refrain from reading suspiciously as long as we are willing to give up the privileges and pleasures of suspicious critique” (461). In other words, in their animus towards the routine deployment of suspicious hermeneutics, these polemics risk overlooking the extent to which many, perhaps even most, literary works concerted invite some degree of suspicious reading—most obviously when they draw attention to conspicuous evasions, lapses, or omissions in a narrative or descriptive account.

Ishiguro’s writing has been consistently characterized by readers, reviewers, and critics in terms of surface and depth. Hermione Lee describes the “deep sadness” that lies “under the immaculate surface” of Ishiguro’s prose (39); of *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Salman Rushdie suggests that “[j]ust below the understatement of the novel’s surface is a turbulence as immense as it is slow” (par. 8); and in 2017, the Nobel Prize committee celebrated Ishiguro as a writer “who, in novels of great emotional force, has uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world” (par. 1).⁴ What motivates these characterizations is the sense of there being a disparity, tension, or dissonance between a narrator’s report and its emotional and ethical impact. As Peter Brooks suggests in *Reading for the Plot* (1984), “all viable works of literature tell us something about how they are to be read,” and plot is certainly one way in which texts “guide us towards the conditions of their interpretation” (xii). Ishiguro has repeatedly employed that most suspicious of narrative techniques, unreliable narration, which

rose to prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in works such as Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915), and by the early twenty-first century has become almost prosaically familiar.⁵ But, as we will shortly see, the dissonance of Ishiguro's fiction is also a product of its deft manipulation of form—of modulations of syntax, register, and tone that guide the reader's epistemic and affective response to that narration. Ishiguro criticism has understandably tended to be less interested in the author's formal endeavors than his ethically-freighted narrative explorations of personal and cultural memory and collective historical guilt in the aftermath of the twentieth century's most catastrophic political events, most obviously, the rise of fascism in Europe and Asia in the 1930s; as Matthew Beedham notes, "although Ishiguro is continually referred to as a master prose stylist, there has been no major stylistic analysis of his writing" (149).⁶ I will later examine and partially contest the most significant exception to this tendency, David James's reading of *Never Let Me Go* (2005), which is notable, not only for its virtuosic formal analysis, but also for its dialogic engagement with current debates about the hermeneutics of suspicion.

As will shortly become apparent, my claim is not that Ishiguro's novels consistently invite a single kind of suspicion, but rather that registering the formal means by which they solicit and dramatise various affective modalities and intensities of suspicious interpretation can help us chart the aesthetic development of his oeuvre. The critical story this article tells is about an increasingly sophisticated mobilization of readerly suspicion, from the conspicuously self-conscious way in which the dissembling narrator of *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) demands an alert skepticism on the part of the reader, to the more subtle thematizations of suspicious reading in Ishiguro's mature fiction—a development most overtly marked by the prevalence of narrators who conceal unsavory truths from themselves rather than (or as well as) others from *The Remains of the Day* onwards. This account concludes with *Never Let Me Go*, which represents the culmination of Ishiguro's movement away from the adversarial narrative voices

of the early novels to a more understated—and incisive—examination of suspicion, framed as one among many other possible epistemic-affective dispositions. Where other critics describe Kathy as naively unsuspecting of the institutions she is both subject to and collaborates with, I suggest that it is precisely because she *does* demonstrate some capacity for suspicious interpretation that her ultimate refusal to repudiate the cloning system in the final pages of the novel is so devastating. Ultimately, to delineate the pivotal role suspicion plays in Ishiguro's fiction is to emphasize the need for future critical work to attend more carefully and responsively to the affective contours of his style—to the ways in which prose can inhabit, model, or even derail disparate affective and epistemic dispositions, with all the political and indeed ideological implications they entail.

Indeed, it is precisely because of the affective capriciousness of Ishiguro's narrative voices, for all their outward lucidity, that they make for a peculiarly instructive test case to map the contiguities between literary enactments of particular modalities of observation and interpretation on the one hand, and alleged proclivities in contemporary critical praxis on the other. Ishiguro's novels certainly don't enact the precise hermeneutic program that advocates of postcritique have (rather tendentially) claimed has become pervasive in literary studies today—and indeed it is difficult to imagine that any fiction which straightforwardly assimilated or channeled such politically scrupulous ideological paranoia would gain as wide an audience as Ishiguro's has. Rather, for the most part, their dramatizations and solicitations of suspicion center on the psychology of (self-)deception. Nevertheless, the protean character of Ishiguro's suspicious forms should caution us against proscribing any one critical stance on the assumption that it can only be extraneous to or arbitrarily imposed onto the text.

It is in this sense that my effort to recast and to an extent rehabilitate suspicion as a vital component of what C. Namwali Serpell calls “lay reading” (1232) is part of a larger advocacy of a more labile approach to critical method.⁷ My aims are broadly consonant with those of

Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, who, in response to more pessimistic prognostications, argue that the proliferating conceptualizations of “form” are a sign that literary studies, far from being in a state of crisis, is “in good enough shape to adapt its distinctive idiom to changing and specific contexts” (668). Such a pragmatic, even pragmatist,⁸ approach is urgently needed in a moment when, with the incorporation of affective modes of criticism into the mainstream of the discipline, mandates about how readers and critics “should” relate to literature—whether in the spirit of friendship, suspicion, pleasure, or play—are gaining significant traction, postcritical reading being only the most prominent example.⁹ This article seeks to demonstrate that formalism is our most valuable resource for countering such mandates—specifically, a temporal, affectively attuned kind of formalism that takes seriously Derek Attridge’s suggestion that “form” is “best understood as a verb,” as “something that happens in the experience of reading” (“Literature at Work,” par. 28).¹⁰ My reading of Ishiguro’s fiction, by illustrating how it evades any single method of interpretation, warns of the critical dangers of deciding in advance that any one approach or affective disposition is necessarily more politically vigilant or aesthetically discriminating—and that doing so risks narrowing our perceptual range, compromising our capacities to describe and appraise prose as elusive as Ishiguro’s. That is to say that formalist close reading is an indispensable pathway to practicing a more methodologically ecumenical criticism in which texts rather than critical agendas shape the interpretative strategies we elect to employ.

The extent to which Ishiguro’s fiction solicits suspicious interpretation is apparent from the opening lines of his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*. The narrator, Etsuko, who left her home in Nagasaki after the end of the Second World War, now lives alone in rural England,

following the suicide of her eldest daughter, Keiko. With emblematic indirection, however, the novel begins, not with Keiko, but with her half-sister:

Niki, the name we finally gave my younger daughter, is not an abbreviation; it was a compromise I reached with her father. For paradoxically it was he who wanted to give her a Japanese name, and I — perhaps out of some selfish desire not to be reminded of the past — insisted on an English one. He finally agreed to Niki, thinking it had some vague echo of the East about it. (9)

The passage subtly plays upon readers' heightened desires for and anxieties about gleaning the basic facts of the narrative at the beginning of a novel, with salient details syntactically subordinated or conveyed only through inference—the pregnant “paradoxically,” for instance, intimating that the narrator is Japanese and Niki’s father is English, whilst the switch from plural pronoun (“we”) to singular possessive (“my daughter”) suggests an estrangement between the parents and between father and daughter. Also note how the first sentence begins with a negation, seemingly anticipating and correcting the reader’s apparent assumption that “Niki” is an abbreviation. The acute self-consciousness about how it might be read or misread, the defensive controlling of its reception, and the thinly veiled hostility towards the implied reader are only the most conspicuous ways in which Etsuko’s narration invites an interrogative stance. This effect is heightened by the slight but significant interpretative missteps the passage puts upon us. The first sentence, for example, requires that we reinterpret “Niki” as referring to the name rather than a character, momentarily prizing apart the signifier and the signified. Similarly, the final sentence initially seems to frame “Niki” as a genuine compromise, only for the second clause to slyly insinuate that Niki’s father was wrong to think it had “some vague echo of the East.” Of course, the “ik” spelling *does* have a decidedly non-English appearance

(“Nicky” being the customary British contraction of Nicola and Nicole), pushing readers to make the same apparently erroneous association, and so raising the worry that, like Niki’s father, we might be hearing the wrong echoes.

Through their particular formal construction, these sentences encourage us to worry about the potential to misread, and specifically to misconstrue names and identities. By the end of the novel, these worries take center stage, when two changes of name and pronoun register the possibility that the story Etsuko has been telling us, about the traumatized young girl and her errant mother whom she befriended in Nagasaki, might be a pseudonymous account of Etsuko’s own relationship with Keiko, a distorted manifestation of unacknowledged feelings of guilt and remorse.¹¹ Significantly, the text does not give us sufficient evidence to definitively decide what “really” happened, profoundly frustrating a desire for narrative closure, and so leaving readers to continually reassess what is and is not “true” within the fiction.¹² I mention these narrative details to make the point that the major thematic preoccupations of *A Pale View of Hills* are formally invoked from the very beginning of the novel. Though the rhetorical features of this frequently discussed passage are easily observed, they have attracted little comment, even from those such as Rebecca Walkowitz (*Cosmopolitan Style*, 129-30) and Andrew Gibson (200) who are explicitly concerned with matters of naming and identity. Part of the distinctiveness of moments like this in Ishiguro’s writing is the way they conspicuously draw attention to the fact that something is being concealed, not only inciting readers’ suspicions, but encouraging us to cling to them by leaving them unresolved.

To differentiate more clearly between suspicion and the kind of narrative suspense that most works of fiction engender, consider the opening lines of two novels by Ishiguro’s contemporaries, Ian McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach* (2007) and John Banville’s *The Sea* (2005):

They were young, educated, and both virgins on this, their wedding night, and they lived in a time when a conversation about sexual difficulties was plainly impossible. (3)

They departed, the gods, the day of the strange tide. All morning under a milky sky the waters in the bay had swelled and swelled, rising to unheard-of heights, the small waves creeping over parched sand that for years had no known wetting save for rain and lapping the very bases of the dune. [...] I would not swim again, after that day. The seabirds mewled and swooped, unnerved, it seemed, by the spectacle of that vast bowl of water bulging like a blister, lead-blue and malignantly agleam. (3)

The opening of *On Chesil Beach* swiftly grounds the reader in the salient facts of the narrative—the deictic pronoun, “this,” for instance, is immediately elaborated in the succeeding clause (“their wedding night”), minimizing readerly uncertainty as much as possible.¹³ The effect is both assured and reassuring; there might be questions the sentence leaves unanswered, but there is certainly no sense that something is being hidden from view—if anything, we might feel embarrassed by how *much* we are told about these characters’ sexual lives. By contrast, Banville’s poetic prose, with its rampant alliteration and assonance, its unusual lexicon peppered with anthimeria, and its elaborate syntax, threatens to overwhelm readers with a density of sensory description. Towards the end of the novel, we learn that, on “the day of the strange tide,” when the narrator was ten years old, his two friends swam out into the sea and drowned. The passage as good as tells us that something traumatic took place, and yet the sheer rhetorical flair of the writing, with its apparently greater interest in depicting the coastal scene in striking and unusual ways, channels the reader’s attention elsewhere. The referent of the opening plural pronoun, for instance, is only obscured by the succeeding clause (who were “the gods,” and in what way did they “depart?”).

Banville's stylistic extravagance offers a dramatic counterpoint to Ishiguro's prose, which from the earliest reviews of *A Pale View of Hills* onwards has been characterized in terms of its modesty, moderation, or restraint—a quality explored more fully below. Where *The Sea* compels us to be enthralled by its formal virtuosity (at the risk of being inattentive to plot), it is precisely because Etsuko's narration is so rhetorically subdued that the parenthetical allusion to memories best forgotten, for instance, stands out so conspicuously, heightening our awareness that she is concealing something from us. As Walkowitz puts it, “unlike the ‘reliable’ narrator, the unreliable narrator is perceived as *being* the story rather than merely *having* one” (*Cosmopolitan Style*, 125).¹⁴ Ishiguro's second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), seems almost to allegorize or dramatize the suspicious reading his works invite, in Masuji Ono's attempts to preemptively confound the private detectives that his prospective in-laws may hire to investigate his murky past.¹⁵

In this sense, *The Remains of the Day* marks a significant shift in Ishiguro's oeuvre; where Etsuko and Masuji seem determined to conceal important facts from the reader, Stevens's narration is a spectacle of self-deception. The drama and tension of the novel arises, firstly, from Stevens's refusal to examine the political activities of his employer (and the reader's dawning realization about the nature of those activities), and secondly, from his comically contorted efforts to imply that he has been a “great” butler without contravening the ideal of “dignity” to which he so earnestly clings, a dynamic aptly described by James as “a practised rhetoric of modesty” (“Artifice,” 61). Readers of this rhetoric necessarily adopt a kind of forbearing and amused suspicion of Stevens's putatively disinterested observations—his reflections on the “greatness” of the Wiltshire countryside, for instance:

[W]hen I stood on that high ledge this morning and viewed the land before me, I distinctly felt that rare, yet unmistakable feeling - the feeling that one is in the presence

of greatness. [...] And yet what precisely is this “greatness”? Just where, or in what, does it lie? I am quite aware it would take a far wiser head than mine to answer such a question, but if I were forced to hazard a guess, I would say that it is the very *lack* of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart. What is pertinent is the calmness of that beauty, its sense of restraint. [...] In comparison, the sorts of sights offered in such places as Africa and America, though undoubtedly very exciting, would, I am sure, strike the objective viewer as inferior on account of their unseemly demonstrativeness.

The whole question is very akin to the question that has caused much debate in our profession over the years: what is a “great” butler? (29)

The correlation of “greatness” and “restraint” here has an obvious self-reflexive implication, underscored by the contrived connection between landscapes and butlers, inviting us to speculate about Stevens’s covert motivations. (The point is reprised in a more troubling key a few pages later when Stevens claims that “Continentalers are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race are capable of.” [44]) The style of the passage, with its apologetic tone and syntactical layering of qualifications, is laden with markers of the modesty that Stevens so reveres—and again, by the end of the novel, his attachment to “restraint” and aversion to “demonstrativeness” turns out to be the great tragedy of his life, in his refusal to abandon professional rectitude and repudiate Lord Darlington, and in his inability to recognize and reciprocate Miss Kenton’s affections. As ever with Ishiguro, we are reading between or beneath the lines, searching for the turmoil not quite hidden by the show of stylistic and affective restraint.

The extent to which, over the course of his oeuvre, Ishiguro has moved away from the overtly duplicitous narrators of his first two novels is no more apparent than in the artlessly

conversational voice in which Kathy H narrates *Never Let Me Go*. James Wood has ruminated on the kinds of reading the text invites:

Reviews of this singular novel have tended to stress the first-stage detection involved in reading it; whereas Ishiguro, as ever, is interested in far foggier hermeneutics. That is to say, in this novel of exquisite occlusions, the question of who these children are and what their function is in modern society is never very deeply withheld. [...] To be sure, Ishiguro wants to ration the pace at which we receive this terrible information, but that is because his real interest is not in what we discover but in what his characters discover, and how it will affect them. He wants us to inhabit their ignorance, not ours. (28-9)

Wood is right to suggest that the experience of reading *Never Let Me Go* is more complex and troubling than that of merely discerning how and why the clone-children have been created, but the notion that we straightforwardly “inhabit” their ignorance is unhelpfully monolithic. At times, our understanding of the novel’s fictional world clearly is proximate to that of the Hailsham students, but we also attempt to probe past what Kathy as both character and narrator seems to know, suspect, or refuse to know or fully recognize about herself and the society in which she lives—a sifting process in which detection plays a not insignificant role. The most blatant means by which *Never Let Me Go* invites suspicious reading is through the euphemistic vocabulary used to describe the organ donation system, which demands that readers look beyond the ordinary meaning of words like “completion” and speculate about what they really mean in this context (“death”).

On the whole, critics have tended to emphasize how limited Kathy’s awareness of her situation is, and her seemingly deliberate efforts to “look away from [...] the Big Picture” (293),

as Bruce Robbins puts it. James has passionately contested the critical propensity to reflexively condemn such inattention, persuasively showing, in his compelling reading of the novel's final lines, how Kathy's momentary flight into consoling fantasy "solicit[s] a reading experience that leaves us [...] caught [...] between compassion and critique" ("Critical Solace," 482). I am less persuaded, however, by James's characterization of Kathy in relation to recent proposals for new interpretative methods:

Connoisseur of surface impressions; spokeswoman for what she notices (in patients, in friendships, in herself through hindsight), instead of what she suspects; defender of actions based around what she accepts, rather than what she unearths—Kathy is the paragon of a descriptive reader. With her at its perspectival helm, *Never Let Me Go* urges us to reflect on the habits of "symptomatic reading," namely, that a text's "most significant truths," as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus put it, "are not immediately apprehensible and may be veiled or invisible." (499)

The connection James draws here between surface impressions and descriptive reading alludes to the interpretative mode Best and Marcus most explicitly identify as "surface reading," which privileges description over interpretation (17). Ellen Rooney has searingly critiqued this mode for its pretensions to objectivity (123), an insight the implications of which I will return to shortly. To be clear, James's essay neither practices nor endorses descriptive reading.¹⁶ Indeed, he persuasively illustrates how the "consoling affordances" of description counterintuitively operate in some of the bleakest contemporary narratives—Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), and Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*—through a practice of what he terms "reading *for* description," which is "nearer the vicinity of a 'strong' rather than 'surface' reading" (484, 500). The essay's larger ambition, of showing how the affective

mobility of contemporary fiction warns us against condoning any one way of reading as necessarily superior or more attentive, is also deeply consonant with the ethos of methodological pragmatism that I am advocating here. Nevertheless, I want to begin my discussion of *Never Let Me Go* by questioning James's characterization of Kathy as "the paragon of a descriptive reader." It is true that her narration predominantly consists of recording everyday, often chillingly banal, observations, rather than any fundamental interrogation of the moral or political basis (or lack thereof) of the cloning system. But just as pivotal are those moments of the novel when Kathy *refuses* to describe, or else describes in ways that are more significant for what she fails to mention—most obviously, when she neglects to detail her most deeply-held fears and desires. Following Rooney, I suggest that what Kathy chooses to observe and to not observe, in both senses of the word (to perceive, to comment on), is not ethically or affectively neutral, but powerfully shapes our reading of the novel.

For throughout *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy is in fact frequently on the lookout for hidden truths, and often acts upon her suspicions. Early in the novel, she suspects that her friend Ruth is lying about having been given a flashy pencil case by a favorite guardian, and even pretends to have seen a Sales register to expose the lie (55-60). As Tommy—the most perceptive of the Hailsham children—recognizes towards the end of the novel, his and Kathy's friendship was partly forged from their shared desire to discover more about their situation: "You and me, right from the start, even when we were little, we were always trying to find things out. Remember, Kath, all those secret talks we used to have? But Ruth wasn't like that. She always wanted to believe in things" (278-9). In these secret talks, Kathy and Tommy often employ the idiom of detection, returning, for instance, to the various "clues" they have assembled (76, 92, 97). As Robert Eaglestone puts it: "The novel is obsessed by secrets and lies, their covering and uncovering" (19). It is important to recognize that Kathy is not merely inquisitive but is specifically a suspicious reader of other people's words. When Tommy relays a conversation

he had with Miss Lucy, in which she shifts suddenly from talking about his lack of creativity to organ donations, Kathy asks “What’s the link?” (30), in much the same way that readers of Stevens’s narration speculate about what lies behind his apparently arbitrary changes of topic. I am not suggesting that Kathy is always or only a suspicious reader, only that suspicion manifestly *is* among the myriad ways that she reads the world around her.

Consider the most significant interpretative act of the novel—Kathy’s response to the song, “Never Let Me Go”:

What was so special about this song? Well, the thing was, I didn’t used to listen properly to the words; I just waited for that bit that went: “Baby, baby, never let me go ...” And what I’d imagined was a woman who’d been told she couldn’t have babies, who’d really, really wanted them all her life. [...] Even at the time, I realised this couldn’t be right, that this interpretation didn’t fit with the rest of the lyrics. But that wasn’t an issue with me. The song was about what I said, and I used to listen to it again and again, on my own, whenever I got the chance. (64)

Here at least, Kathy is less interested in describing the song than in using it as a prompt for her own, idiosyncratic imaginings, with their own highly particular affective investments. As when Felski describes the governess of *The Turn of the Screw* as “the quintessential suspicious reader” (104), to label Kathy “a descriptive reader” risks implying that characters reify a single interpretative principle, rather than enact and act upon myriad, sometimes conflicting, ways of interpreting their social worlds.

In a similar fashion, critical descriptions of Kathy’s narration have tended to flatten or constrict its rhetorical heterogeneity. The passage quoted above, with its awkward repetitions, superfluous conjunctions, and colloquial idiom is a fair example of how ungainly, even gauche,

Kathy's prose can sometimes be. This has led some critics to claim that her manner of speech is not merely inelegant, but is in some sense "inhumanly" unoriginal—usually in the context of larger arguments about the "clones" representing a radically different form of personhood. Shameem Black, for instance, labels Kathy's "mechanical, manufactured, and replicated" narration an "inhuman style" or "inhuman aesthetic" (786).¹⁷ But the evidence for this claim amounts to little more than the observation that "Kathy repeatedly uses the same device to introduce new episodes in the narrative" (799). In fact, most of us employ the same phrases over and over again in our everyday speech (as anyone who has listened to a recording of themselves in conversation knows all too well); there is nothing particularly unusual about this rhetorical trait in a novel that, like many others—John Fowles's *The Collector* (1963), for instance, or Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993)—deliberately adopts an idiomatic narrative voice. The novel gives us no serious grounds for interpreting its narration as inhumanly unoriginal, nor does it support the notion that the Hailsham children are non-persons, as some critics have claimed.¹⁸

After all, Kathy's narration is not consistently inelegant, but is sporadically punctuated by flights of lyricism, most notably in the recurrent images of clasping and letting go, which increase in prevalence and explicitness as the novel draws to a close. The haunting scene following Tommy and Kathy's encounter with Miss Emily, when they discover that there is no prospect of him deferring his organ donations, is typical of the narratorial coalescence of banality and eloquence. As they drive back to Tommy's medical center, he asks Kathy to park the car on the verge of a country road and disappears into the darkening fields, from which she suddenly hears his screams:

I could make out in the mid-distance, near where the field began to fall away, Tommy's figure, raging, shouting, flinging his fists and kicking out.

I tried to run to him, but the mud sucked my feet down. The mud was impeding him too, because one time, when he kicked out, he slipped and fell out of view into the blackness. But his jumbled swear-words continued uninterrupted, and I was able to reach him just as he was getting to his feet again. I caught a glimpse of his face in the moonlight, caked in mud and distorted with fury, then I reached for his flailing arms and held on tight. He tried to shake me off, but I kept holding on, until he stopped shouting and I felt the fight go out of him. Then I realised he too had his arms around me. And so we stood together like that, at the top of that field, for what seemed like ages, not saying anything, just holding each other, while the wind kept blowing and blowing at us, tugging our clothes, and for a moment, it seemed like we were holding onto each other because that was the only way to stop us being swept away into the night. (268-9)

It is necessary to quote at length here to illustrate the onward march of unadorned, cerebral, almost impassive description, which neglects to detail any of the emotions—distress? anguish? panic? despair? —we assume Kathy must have felt. The colloquial idioms (“for ages,” “fight go out of him,” etc.) are by now familiar enough, but there is something disquieting to the descriptive attention paid to the mud and its constriction of their movements, rather than Kathy’s feelings. Nevertheless, there are flashes of more impressionistic prose: Tommy falling “into the blackness,” his face being “distorted with fury,” and, most striking, the uncharacteristically abstract evocation of the two “holding onto each other because that was the only way to stop us being swept away into the night,” with its metonymic invocation of imminent loss. Yet even this image bears too much of a resemblance to *Tommy’s* description of his feelings several pages later (276), as though Kathy can only allow herself to lapse into someone else’s eloquence.

It is vital to recognize that Kathy is not merely trying and failing to be eloquent, but is actively suspicious of elevated language and, not unlike Stevens, averse to the “excessively” performative, demonstrative, or expressive—a suspicion that rightly prompts a heightened attention to the rhetorical distortions and omissions of her narration, whose character formalism is well-calibrated to delineating. One of the rare moments when Kathy becomes unpleasant as a narrator, albeit in a comic way, is when she scathingly details the affectations Ruth picks up from older students at the cottages (118-9). There is a deliberate bathos to her account, and a tendency to neglect to mention any of her own heightened emotions (and especially those emotions which readers most earnestly want her to articulate), or to describe them only once they have passed. The first time Kathy admits to being hurt by Ruth keeping her and Tommy apart, for instance, is when she tells us that she has forgiven her friend and has “no anger left for her now” (279). This admission notably prefaces the devastatingly matter-of-fact description of Kathy and Tommy’s final parting (279-80), forestalling any attempt to read it as a turning point or development in her emotional life. She tells us, with something approaching pride, that they “didn’t do any big farewell number that day” (279), as though to show signs of distress would be melodramatic, a mere performance or dramatic routine.

This is to make the obvious but critical point, following Rooney, that what a narrator chooses to observe—and not observe—is not neutral, but powerfully conditions how readers think and feel. To take an extreme example—Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955)—Humbert Humbert’s obsessive attentions to Lolita’s body and the near-absence of description of her thoughts and feelings manifestly invites repugnance and censure. The affects engendered by Kathy’s selective attentions are rather more subtle. The framing of *Never Let Me Go* as an account of Kathy’s life, our piecemeal realization about the nature of the cloning system, and the teleological expectations of the novel genre together push readers to anticipate that the

novel will culminate with Kathy coming to recognize the terrible injustice of that system, and her own complicity in perpetuating it in her capacity as a carer. But that recognition never comes; readers wait in vain for Kathy to share in the horror and outrage we feel about the institutional murder of the two people she so lovingly recollects. As John Mullan eloquently puts it: “The haunting fatalism of Ishiguro’s narrator has puzzled or frustrated readers who nonetheless admire the novel. [...] [T]he cleverest, saddest constraint of the novel is the limit it places upon its characters’ imaginings” (104-5). The mounting frustration at Kathy’s unwillingness or inability to critique, repudiate, or rail against what has been done to the Hailsham children is at the heart of the intense pathos of reading *Never Let Me Go*, which, like *The Remains of the Day*, is ultimately a tragedy of discipline and restraint. This is partly why Tommy’s childhood rages, for which he was notorious at Hailsham, are so peculiarly significant; because he at least, however chaotically and inchoately, seems to protest against the end that has been determined for the clones. Towards the end of the novel, Kathy suggests to Tommy, “maybe the reason you used to get like that was because at some level you always *knew*,” to which he replies: “Maybe I did know, somewhere deep down. Something the rest of you didn’t” (270). Kathy, of course, neglects to explicitly say *what* it is that she thought Tommy knew. Far from celebrating the habit of attending to “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible,” the novel marks Tommy out as exceptional precisely because of his capacity to suspect—and express a violent emotional reaction to—the open secret about why the children have been created. His rage is the closest readers get to the critique we are awaiting, and willing Kathy to articulate.

The frustrated desire for a reckoning that never comes is central to what makes the final pages of *Never Let Me Go* so devastating, and so central to any understanding of the novel. Shortly after Tommy’s death, Kathy is driving aimlessly around Norfolk when she stops the car to look at a fence and a cluster of trees that have caught rubbish blown by the wind:

That was the only time, as I stood there, looking at that strange rubbish, feeling the wind coming across those empty fields, that I started to imagine just a little fantasy thing, because this was Norfolk after all, and it was only a couple of weeks since I'd lost him. I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I'd see it was Tommy, and he'd wave, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that—I didn't let it—and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be. (282)

The sentence describing Kathy's fantasy is distended by parataxis, the accumulation of clauses suggesting how she lingers on this consoling prospect, despite herself. Yet part of what makes these lines so moving is our awareness of how constrained Kathy's imaginings are. James is right that, here, "Ishiguro liberates Kathy's diction from the clichés of her foregoing recollections" (496). But whilst her diction is marked by a rare eloquence, the figurative conceit and prompt for this reverie is the troublingly clichéd association of the "clones" with material detritus, echoing Ruth's harsh words earlier in the novel: "We're modelled from *trash*" (164).¹⁹ Even in this most intimate of fantasies, Kathy seems unable to find other ways of imagining herself and those she has loved and lost.

The paucity of Kathy's imaginings is only accentuated by the achingly characteristic performance of self-restraint. She notably introduces this episode as "the only indulgent thing

[she] did" (281), the implication that grief is an indulgence performatively underscored by the refusal to name the emotion. The novel's penultimate sentence once again exhibits Kathy's tragically misplaced pride in her ability to exercise control over her feelings. But perhaps most affecting of all is the modesty of Kathy's hope that Tommy might "wave, maybe even call," as though wanting to hear his voice again were an immoderate desire. The haunting acquiescence of the final line, which declines to say who or what determines "wherever it was [she] was supposed to be," brings home the deep concordance between Kathy's determined restraint and her final refusal to name, repudiate, or critique the system that has taken Tommy and Ruth from her. To emphasize this acquiescence is not to pass over the aesthetic qualities of the novel in favor of ideological critique, but to read those qualities more closely; to recognize how, through movements of syntax, imagery, and tone, the prose registers everything Kathy does not—and perhaps cannot—say, that which remains hidden or hiding.

Reading *Never Let Me Go* makes plain the need to maintain the experiential dialectic between the observable elements of literary expression and what those elements intimate is being occluded or obscured—a good illustration of the arbitrary difficulties generated by reifying methodological binaries of surface and depth. As critics, it is necessary to take the risk of tabulating what is neither evident nor apprehensible, if we are to chart the affective contours of Ishiguro's style. Which is to say that the frustrated desire for Kathy to critique the cloning regime she has helped to propagate is not an extraneous political demand imposed upon the text, but an impulse powerfully activated by Ishiguro's virtuosic narratorial performance of willed inattention, misdirection, and ignorance. The primary response to this frustration should not be to repurpose it in the service of ideological suspicion, but to register its centrality to the affective force of the novel. As I have previously suggested, accounts which presuppose that the clones represent a fundamentally different mode of human subjectivity have misfired precisely insofar as they have privileged the allegorical implications of narrative over the

rhetorical evidence of narration. To point this out is not to proscribe political interpretations, but to urge that such readings proceed from the affective and aesthetic particularities of Ishiguro's deft manipulations of suspicious form.

My readings of novels from across Ishiguro's oeuvre have collectively sought to elucidate the centrality of suspicion to his aesthetics. But the readings have also tacitly drawn on a range of critical resources—the analysis of *A Pale View of Hills* invoked archetypally poststructuralist concerns, the response to *The Remains of the Day* employed interpretative maneuvers pioneered by psychoanalytic criticism, and the interpretation of *Never Let Me Go* was shaped by current conversations about affect and ideological critique. Like an Ishiguro narrator, I neglected to mention these salient theoretical contexts, instead emphasizing the ways in which formalist close reading can bring into relief the fundamental philosophical or phenomenological stakes of a given passage—whether that be the slippery referentiality of language, the psychology of self-deception, or the ethics of institutional complicity—and, in doing so, provide the means for identifying the most necessary or compelling interpretative strategies. Common to my responses to various critics in this article has been a refusal to reduce the complex, often contradictory, character of a novel—and the experience of reading it—to a single, static proposition: detection is at times central and at other times peripheral to reading *Never Let Me Go*; Kathy's narration is neither relentlessly banal nor unerringly eloquent, but oscillates unevenly between the two; she is capable of reading suspiciously, but also of being obtusely, tragically, inattentive. Which is to say that only a synthetic mode of criticism, pragmatically drawing on a plurality of critical strategies, can forestall global judgments of this kind.

Such critical pragmatism does not, however, entail a shotgun approach, employing any and every interpretative resource at hand, but rather allowing our readings to be shaped by the aesthetic and interpretative priorities of texts made legible by affectively-attuned, formally-attentive close reading. In practice, this is a criticism which is receptive to pursuing the paths texts lead us to, even if we subsequently question their directions; to immersing ourselves in seemingly unsavory modes of thought and feeling; to reaching for unfamiliar, even uncritical, descriptive idioms and vocabularies; and, above all, to attending to aspects of literary works and our relations to them that at first sight might appear trivial, banal, obsolete, or even perverse. In a critical moment when mandates about how critics “should” relate to literature have become ubiquitous, Ishiguro’s fiction represents a salutary reminder that innovative methods should be the means rather than the ends of our critical enquiries; indeed, it is precisely because his novels, despite exploring a consistent set of concerns about memory, identity, and ethical responsibility, confound any one way of reading that they have proven so alluring for readers and critics—a refusal of programmatic or paradigmatic thinking that should be central to twenty-first century re-evaluations of Ishiguro’s oeuvre.

Notes

¹ See, for instance: Fleissner; Garber; North.

² The following is a representative sample of these interventions: Anker and Felski; Best and Marcus; Best, Marcus, and Love; Brown and Wolfson; Felski; Gallop; Hickman and McIntyre; Kramnick and Nersessian; Levine; Levinson; Moretti; Theile and Tredennick; Thompson.

³ Elsewhere (“Reading Against Polemic”), I have argued that the self-consciously polemical tenor of recent conversations about critical method has hindered efforts to change or diversify our repertoire of approaches, and that the discipline’s would-be innovators would do better to refocus their efforts away from packaged polemics and towards compelling readings that have the potential to persuade others of the analytic value of their intellectual insights.

⁴ See also: Newton (276), Shaffer (10), King (165), and Kamine (21).

⁵ There is surprisingly little scholarship on the history of unreliable narration as a literary-narrative mode, as opposed to the extensive theoretical and narratological work on the subject. See: Booth (211-234), D’hoker and Martens (1-6), and Nünning (56-62).

⁶ With respect to the privileging of thematic over stylistic analysis, the critical tendency to describe narrative concerns as aesthetic or formal features is telling; Cynthia F. Wong and Hülya Yıldız, for example, describe “the relationship of memory to self-identity and cultural formation” as an “aesthetic element” of Ishiguro’s fiction (4).

⁷ This article’s promotion of methodological pragmatism has much in common with Thom Dancer’s advocacy of “critical modesty” (205).

⁸ Elsewhere (“Close Reading, Epistemology, and Affect”), I have argued that the neo-pragmatist philosophy of Richard Rorty opens up new methodological possibilities for critics concerned with theories and practices of close reading.

⁹ See, for instance: Felski (13); Fuss; Simpson (380).

¹⁰ See also: Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (113).

¹¹ The first is a short section in which the first-person narrator, presumably still Etsuko, speaks to the girl, Mariko, as if she rather than Mariko’s mother, Sachiko, were taking the girl to America (172-3). The second is when Etsuko tells Niki that Keiko was happy on the day of their trip to the Inasa Hills (182); when the trip is described earlier in the novel, however, readers are given to understand that Keiko was not yet born, whilst Mariko’s happiness that

day is detailed at some length (103-25).

¹² H. Porter Abbott's *Real Mysteries* persuasively argues for the necessity of recognizing that some narratives are fundamentally undecidable.

¹³ Similarly, though the meaning and significance of its narrative remains deeply puzzling, the opening of *The Buried Giant* (2015) directly provides readers with the kind of diegetic context that Ishiguro's other works conspicuously omit or defer—an indication of how much of a departure this novel is from the rest of his oeuvre.

¹⁴ Elke D'hoker gives an excellent overview of the various modes of narratorial "unreliability" across Ishiguro's oeuvre (147-70); this article might be seen as a stylistic counterpart to her narratological study.

¹⁵ The dramatization of processes of detection takes on an even more explicit form in *When We Were Orphans*, narrated by a private detective, Christopher Banks, who tries to solve the mystery of his parents' disappearance.

¹⁶ The connotations of "paragon" are potentially unhelpful, if read in isolation from the wider ambitions of James's essay.

¹⁷ Walkowitz similarly intimates that Kathy's "unoriginal expression" is somehow related to her status as a clone, a non-original person (*Born Translated*, 103).

¹⁸ Elsewhere ("Contemporary Realism, Postmodernism, and Bodily Feeling"), I have argued against Nancy Armstrong's claim that *Never Let Me Go* "confronts us with forms of human life so innovative as to make it next to impossible for us to recognize ourselves in them" (442)—a reading which radically overstates how unusual the Hailsham children are. I am equally unconvinced by Louis Menand's suggestion that the children are "simulators of humanness" ("Something About Kathy") and Nathan Snaza's claim that "in identifying with Kathy [...] we become as inhuman as she is" (230). Though I agree with Peter Boxall that *Never Let Me Go*'s "keen pathos" partly emerges from "its studied lack of emotional drama or complexity" (98),

his reading, like Armstrong's, too readily assumes that the Hailsham children are "non-human"; rather, the pathos of the novel *depends* on readers recognizing the humanity of the donors, as their society does not. As Eaglestone notes, one effect of the intimate narratorial address is that, by the time we learn that their humanity is in question, "the reader already knows from Kathy [...] that the clones have a rich, human interior life" (24).

¹⁹ Kelly Rich foregrounds Ruth's tirade in a reading of *Never Let Me Go* which emphasizes the ways the clones at once recognize and refuse to recognize what Rich calls their "thoroughly infrastructural being" (640). Without contesting Rich's compelling larger argument about infrastructuralized subjectivity, it seems to me that, when Ruth says "look in rubbish bins [...] [l]ook down the toilet" (164), she's comparing the clones to detritus and shit rather than bins and toilets—an image invoked in the final lines of the novel.

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